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Ronny R. Kraft
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Bofes e Sapinhas:
Lesbian life in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil

Ronny R. Kraft
Spring 2005

Valquíria Cost, President Grupo Palavra de Mulher
School for International Training – CSA Brazil - Northeast

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Abstract

For three weeks I studied lesbian women in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil through formal interview, informal interview and observation. I wanted to find out how lesbians interact with a machismo society that treats homosexuality as taboo and women as lesser. I discovered that lesbian women, in Salvador, mainly fall into two categories. The first category describes women that are masculine in nature and therefore are obviously homosexual to the public. The second category of lesbians is less distinguishable by their outward appearance and thus blends in with mainstream society. Through observation and interview I discovered that there is a higher amount of group two lesbians living in Salvador. Both categories are oppressed, however only the first group of lesbians is labeled as deviants and marginalized to uphold the moral codes of Salvadorian machismo culture. Category two lesbians live their lives under the radar perceptible homosexual behavior and consequently do not interact socially with category one lesbians. In addition, the first group of lesbians receives the same levels of discrimination as gay men who are, on the whole, more visible in society than lesbians, because both communities are conspicuously gay to the general public.

Introduction

I set out to study lesbians in Salvador in an effort to understand how gay women function as part of a subversive minority community within the machismo culture of Brazil. Homosexuals present a demographic group that cleaves across race and class and thus lesbians in Salvador live in the same machismo culture that subjugates all women through violence and oppression.¹ Brazil is a patriarchal society that values women less than men and therefore advantages men with greater control and mobility than women due to the continued sexual inequality that is built into societal structure. Growing up, women learn from the social models around them that they are naturally meant to raise children and keep a home. The reality for women in Brazil centers on their purported responsibility of maintaining the family unit of society. When women step out of this role, they are paid, on average, less than men for similarly job stations.² In addition, the power structure asserted by the machismo social tradition requires that women be docile, fragile, and sensitive. When women don't fit into this mold they are marginalized and separated out of society. As a result of the machismo values that dominate the lives of Brazilians, lesbians within this society often live lives of invisibility and secrecy.

I will examine lesbianism in Salvador using the sociological framework to homosexuality, which approaches sexual orientation as a construction of society

¹ Miriam Martinho, *Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Women's Human Rights* (International Gay and Lesbian Human Right Commission, 1995), 15.

² Peggy A. Lovell, "Gender, Race, and the Struggle for Social Justice in Brazil," *Latin American Perspectives* 27, no. 26 (November 2000): 89.

and history. Sociological discourse on sexuality asserts that sexuality is not simply limited to the Freudian definition of sexuality, as a primal, purely biological faction of internal forces.³ On the contrary to Freud's socio-biological interpretations of sexuality, I study lesbianism as an orientation which reveals the social norms and. In her article, "The Homosexual Role," sociologist Mary McIntosh claimed that homosexuality was "invariant in expression across societies and over time, that it could be diagnosed by the appropriate professional, and that its etiology could, in principle, be excavated by science."⁴ In addition, McIntosh's claims that,

"The homosexual' has come to occupy a specific social role in modern societies. Because homosexual *practices* are widespread but socially threatening... a special, stigmatized category of *individuals* is created so as to keep the rest of society pure. By this means, a 'clear cut, publicized and recognizable threshold between permissible and impermissible behavior' is constructed."⁵

She continues to state that anyone who crosses this threshold is marginalized in society through various forms of sexism, racism, and homophobia. I will show that lesbians in Salvador provide support to this theory of exclusion and are currently struggling against this label of deviance by conducting their lives in secrecy. I will seek out the social constructs within the area of female homosexuality in order to show the ways in which oppressive moral codes of society manifest and affect

³ Steven, Epstein, "A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality," *Sociological Theory* 12, No. 2 (July 1994): 190.

⁴ Ibid, 191.

⁵ Ibid.

lesbians in their daily lives. I examine the categories that society has created to label and separate lesbians and then go on to examine how these categories influence how lesbians interact with each other and with society.

Salvador has a population of 2,637,000 and is the capital port city of the state of Bahia located in the northeast coastal region of Brazil. Descendants of African slaves make up approximately 87 % of the population and therefore the city has the strongest African influence of any city outside of Africa. The region is one of the poorest areas of Brazil, with workers earning a meager minimum wage of approximately 100 U.S. dollars per month. Salvador is also plagued by daily urban violence, often taking the form of police brutality.

To the outside world Salvador is marketed as a city without racism because of the large percentage of citizens of African descent. The city is sold as a completely mixed society that doesn't discriminate on the basis of religion, race, or gender. However, on the inside, the marginalized factions of society live a different reality. Inequality is abundant and blaringly obvious to anyone who wishes to take a deeper look. There exists a strong underlying moral code in Salvadorian society that treats certain behaviors as taboo. Homosexuality is one of these. Mainstream society holds fast to the belief that women are meant to be with men and that homosexuality doesn't actually exist naturally. Luiz Mott, president of *Grupo Gay da Bahia*, in reference to the situation for homosexuals in Brazil asserts, "This is a very macho country. Homophobia takes a very violent form here."⁶

⁶ "Gay-Bashing Widespread in Macho Brazil," *The Toronto Star*, 20 October 2000.

During the colonial era in Brazil, many aspects of life were ruled strictly through violence and oppression in order to secure the right of the minority class of ruling European elites. Leftover from this period is a clear-cut code of values that govern the moral codes and socio-economic relationships of Brazilian people. Lesbians, gays and transvestites self-report that they compose approximately ten percent of the 170 million people that live in Brazil⁷ and yet only about five percent are open with their sexuality.⁸ Over 2000 homosexuals were killed in Brazil over the last 10 years by hate-related violence.⁹ This is more than in either Mexico or the US.¹⁰

⁷ Mario Osava. "Rights-Brazil: Courts Start to Recognize Same-Sex Couples." Interpress Service, January 14, 2002

⁸ "What is the GGB?" www.ggb.org/br

⁹ Osava, "Courts."

¹⁰ Mott, Luiz. "Brazil: Organizing for Gay Rights in Bahia." *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 11 no. 6 (November 2004): 44.

Definition of Terms

In this paper I use the term “lesbian” to signify a woman who is homosexual. Homosexual is defined as “of, relating to or characterized by a tendency to direct sexual desire toward another of the same sex”, by the Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary.¹¹ I will use this term interchangeably with “lesbian woman”, “gay woman” and “homosexual woman.” I use the term “girlfriend” to mean female lover, female partner, and female intimate companion. The term “lesbianism” is the act of being lesbian. In addition, I utilize the terms “closeted” and “out” as synonyms for the acts of concealing and revealing homosexual identity, respectively. The word “femme” is interchangeable with “feminine” and “butch” is interchangeable with “masculine.” In addition I will introduce several other terms for “lesbian”, which emerged from my research, within the context of the discussion.

My personal motives for doing this research study were formed partly due to the fact that I live in a very liberal minded city in the United States. I am very accustomed to seeing people who live alternative lifestyles in my everyday life. After a short while of being in Brazil for my first time I realized that I had not seen any women who fit the typical masculine lesbian stereotype and therefore I found that I could not identify gay Brazilian women simply through observation. On the contrary, I had observed a disproportionately higher level of gay men. This seemed to indicate that gay men are more visible in Brazilian society than gay

¹¹ Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary Online

women. I was also informed that lesbians in Brazil are more discriminated against than gay men. This was a shock to me. Given my understanding of the machismo culture, I would have thought that gay men would be seen as not masculine enough and therefore more discriminated against in Brazil than gay women, who are generally viewed as striving towards masculinity. As a result of this new information about cultural bias and the apparent minimal visibility of gay women, I was intrigued as to how lesbian women in Brazilian society functioned in their everyday lives given current social factors. I also became interested in what these social factors are and how they influence current attitudes towards lesbian women as perceived by lesbian women themselves. My final decision to study lesbians came when I visited the Grupo Gay da Bahia and found that the Grupo Lésbica did not exist anymore in Salvador. I wondered why lesbians did not organize in a similar way as gay men and I so decided to study the history of gay movements in Brazil.

General Descriptions of Settings and History

In his account of the Brazilian gay liberation movement, James N. Green points out that his article does not include information about a separate lesbian movement because one simply did not exist.¹² The earliest organizations of homosexuals in Brazil were almost entirely composed of men.¹³ In 1970 when a debate was held between *Somos*, the leading gay rights group at the time, Green notes that visibility of the gay rights movement was raised and consequently the next meeting included many new female members who had previously not been active in the movement. Because of this higher awareness, women began to equal men in terms of participation in the group and brought to the fight issues of the male hierarchy and machismo.¹⁴ This same year the lesbians that participated in *Somos* began to hold separate meetings.¹⁵ That next year they separated completely and formed the Ação Lésbica-Feminista.¹⁶ This group continued to be connected with *Somos* through activism and events.

The *Beca das Artistas* is an alley off of a main street stemming from *Campo Grande*, the largest plaza located near the city center surrounded by historical buildings, hotel, and theatres, where many people come to exercise, take pictures, play chess, and socialize. During the day the *Beca*, as it is affectionately called by its frequenters, looks like any other abandoned alley. Friday nights this alley

¹² James N. Green, "The Emergence of the Brazilian Gay Liberation Movement, 1977-1981," *Latin American Perspectives* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 45.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Green, "Liberation Movement", 46.

¹⁶ Ibid.

becomes alive with people streaming in and out of the three main bars, the largest of these being the *Camarim Bar* which stretches through five rooms down the length of the alley with two main outlets to the alley that become congested on busy nights. Inside they play a range of music from Ana Carolina to Prince to Techno. There were several tables and chairs in each room made of dark wood and covered in bamboo places mats. The lights were low and colored. There were two pool tables in the second to last room.

The *Grupo Gay da Bahia*(GGB) was the first human rights organization for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender(GLBT) in the Brazil.¹⁷ The group was started by Dr. Luiz R. B. Mott in 1980. Since its start the group has organized to fight homophobia and sexual discrimination and promote awareness of GLBT issues. The GGB building provides a meeting space for other GLBT organizations in Salvador. In addition, the GGB produces pamphlets and other materials for distribution that raise consciousness about homosexuality and AIDS.

Grupo Palavra de Mulher(GPM) is a social organization, headed by President Valquíria Costa, which works to combat discrimination, prejudice, homophobia and sexism to secure the rights to reproduction, family planning, abortion, and living wages for women. The GPM works on different projects funded by various organizations. They are currently finishing a project that aimed towards the prevention of AIDS in women. The group gives lectures and presentations at high schools, middle schools, and universities. Although they are not officially a lesbian

¹⁷ Mott, “Organizing”, 44.

organization, the group also promotes an agenda to raise awareness of GLBT issues and foster unity within the lesbian community. The majority of the women that work with GPM and that attend meetings are homosexual. GPM provides a safe space for lesbians to discuss and debate issues that they face in their daily life.

Center Lapa is a mall in the downtown area of the city near the main public library and many public schools. The third floor food court is known as a "gay plaza" to gay youth, particularly a small area of tables in front of an ice cream shop. The court is a convenient place for lesbians and gays to meet up, hang out, eat, and listen to live music. The place becomes quite full after 5 O'clock when the high schools let out and everyone gets off of work.

Methods of Field Study

I used three methods of field study. First, I observed interactions and activities of lesbian women. Through doing this I discovered how lesbians function in their environment and in turn how society reacts to them. By observing I can take in the physical manifestations of cultural influences and thus compare these to the data I receive from interviews and secondary sources. I visited many places from a list of establishments distributed by the GGB. Because of the socially sensitive nature of the subject I studied, I chose to use these places to meet new contacts as well as settings for my interviews. This served two purposes. One is that I had a higher chance of correctly picking out potential lesbian contacts. The second reason is that these places provided a safe place to talk about homosexuality. This helped to keep my subjects comfortable and reduce my risk of offending someone.

Secondly, I conducted informal interviews with people with different sexual orientations and socio-economic levels living in Salvador. These interviews were carried out during the entirety of the ISP period. From these I gained perspective on how lesbian, gay, transgender, and heterosexual people perceive lesbian women. In these interviews asked general, open ended and close-ended questions regarding homosexuality and more specifically lesbians. For example, how can you tell if a woman is gay? Do you know any gay women? How do you feel about masculine lesbians? Are there more gay women or men in Salvador? Etc.

Thirdly, I conducted formal interviews with 10-15 lesbian women. During these interviews I attempted to ask more personal questions about how they identify as lesbian and how they perceive their community. For the most part I held the interviews in safe settings such as the third floor of *Center Lapa* and the office of *Palavra de Mulher*. I scheduled these interviews for the first two weeks of the ISP period so that could have time to do second run interviews. I asked many of the same questions as stated above in my informal interviews but in addition I also asked questions that require longer answers and more consideration. For example, how was your first lesbian experience? What do you think of butch/femme lesbians? Do you ever feel discriminated against? If so, tell me about it. How do you get along with your family? I also asked basic, closed ended questions in order to establish my independent factors. For example, how old are you? Where do you live? What is your occupation? Are you religious? Etc.

Lastly, I conducted a few formal interviews with key informants such as the coordinators of Grupo Gay, my project advisor, and other people whose work or area of study involves lesbian/gay/transgender studies. These key informants provided knowledge about the larger picture of homosexual life in Salvador. I asked questions about gender roles within the homosexual community and statistics about population and crime. These people also helped me to meet other key informants as well as subjects for the aforementioned formal interviews with lesbian women.

One of my biggest problems in doing the field study was my very base grasp of Portuguese. I would have liked to get more personal and not stick to my prepared list of questions so vehemently. Often I found that I wanted to ask a question that would expound upon a statement that someone had just made, but was unable because I couldn't find the correct words. This weakness in my research became obvious to me when I interviewed an English speaking lesbian. During this interview, although I still conducted it primarily in Portuguese, I was able to ask more questions that arose in the moment through a few English exchanges. I think my interviews could have been longer and deeper had I been able to speak Portuguese fluently.

Another problem that arose for some of my interviews has to do with location. The top floor of *Center Lapa*, as previously described, is generally crowded and noisy. On one particular evening when I was conducting an interview I felt that the crowd and the noise interfered with the authenticity of the outcome. Although Center Lapa provided a comfortable setting to conduct many of my other interviews, I think that perhaps a quieter and more secluded place would have been more ideal.

Categories

Throughout my research I encountered many slang terms for a homosexual woman used within the lesbian community. Most of these terms fell into two categories. The first category includes the terms "*coturno*," "*bofe*," "*sapatão*," "*franchau*," and "*joão*." These names are labels for a separate faction of lesbians who behave much like men. Many of the terms, such as "*sapatão*" which literally means "big feet," are used negatively by non-lesbians. The women that fall into this first category prefer to have relationships with heterosexual or bisexual women and "*ladies*", gay women who act very feminine, dress womanly and wear makeup all the time. Many times their partners have children and/or husbands. Consequently, their relationships are very complicated. In public they do not exchange affection with their girlfriends. This category generally does not mix with the second category of lesbian women.

Most of my interviews were with women who fall into the second category of lesbians. Some names for these women are "*sapata*," "*sandalia*," "*sapinha*," "*percata*," and "*lésbica*." In addition, "*bofinho*" describes a younger woman in this group, generally under the age of 19. The outward appearance of group two lesbians resembles the look of heterosexual women. These women generally date other women from this category. They usually have not had relations with men and tend to reject bisexual women.

"*Goby*" and "*cross*" are used to describe women who are not quite as masculine as a "*bofe*" but not as femme as a "*sapinha*." These women have a

masculine nature but occasionally dress in skirts. Generally they wear baggy pants, men's underwear and adopt other traditionally male aesthetics. My advisor said that nowadays, ambiguity such as shown in this category of lesbians is becoming more accepted. Lesbians don't need to swing between butch and femme extremes. Some lesbians identify as "meta/meta" which means half man and half woman. I specified the separate groups in order to show the different ways in which lesbians interact with society and the implications of these behaviors. However, for the purposes of my argument I will only be discussing the differences and similarities between the first two categories of lesbians that I just described. Additionally, since the majority of my interviews were with women from the second group I will mostly be discussing how group two lesbians interact in relation to society and also in relation to group one lesbians.

Public displays of affection

In the streets of Salvador you can regularly see heterosexual couples locked in embrace kissing without a care as to the rest of the world. Brazilian society eroticizes the idea of two women together but in actuality does not want the reality of actually seeing two women showing affection in public. Many lesbian women are aware of this contradiction. The lesbians I interview reported that they show public affection in certain places and not others. I noticed a far greater amount of public affection between men and between women at gay places such as the *Beca das Artistas* and *Cien Fuegos* on their weekly gay night. *Center Lapa*

was also reported to be a safe place to show affection. Although, one lesbian told me that there was a group of people in Lapa that were watching the homosexuals, making threats and then assaulting them outside.

Many group two lesbians reported that they felt free to show affection for their partners in any location. In this case lesbian woman are actually at an advantage over gay males because of cultural norms. In Salvador it is very common for women to hug, kiss each the on the cheek and hold hands without these affections meaning anything other than friendship. This is a culture of female physical affection. However, if two men were to walk down the street holding hands or were to kiss or hug each other goodbye this would signify to the people observing that these two men are homosexual. Were this not a societal norm for women to be openly affectionate with each other I venture to say that lesbian women would not show any public displays of affection with their partners. A young couple I interviewed at Center Lapa provided a good example of the inconspicuousness of public displays of affection between women. When I first met them, one of them was massaging the other's back. A friend went and asked if I could interview them and they agreed so I went over to their table where they were sitting with another friend. One of the women quickly whisked me away to another table within sight of the first table before I could start my questioning. When we were alone at the table she told me that their friend at the other table didn't know that she and her girlfriend were gay and together. I was shocked to hear this since she had been running her hands up and down her girlfriend's back

at the same table. Later, while I was conducting the interview her girlfriend came over and hugged her and kissed her on the side of the head. They explained that this type of affection was common between women. The only indications that I noticed of the existence of a deeper intimacy were that their arms stayed clasped, hands lingered and they looked at each other with a slight hint of mutual adoration. Although, I don't believe that these clues would have been obvious had I not already been informed of their being a couple.

When I asked my subjects about the different types of affection that they show freely in public most of the women reported that they did not kiss in public very much, even in the places where it was relatively safe for them to show public affection. Given how the culture normally reacts to kissing in public, this shows that lesbian women are not comfortable showing the same level of affection for their partners as heterosexuals. One young woman I talked to said that to show affection in public for another woman is dangerous because you never know who is watching. She was not out to her family. Consequently, she said that she is too afraid that they would find out because they had been driving by while she was showing affection for her girlfriend, which happened to a friend of hers. She also said that showing affection in public is dangerous because someone homophobic could be watching. My research shows that the less out a person were to their family the less they felt comfortable showing any form of public affection.

Relationship with family

I discovered that every family deals with their lesbian members differently. Homosexuality does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, or class. One of the main factors that I found influenced how my lesbian subjects related to their family was religion. I interviewed women who came from families with a range of different belief systems. My research showed that the families that were described to be the most religious were also the families where the lesbian daughters were the most closeted and or in conflict. I also discovered that a majority of the lesbians I interviewed reported having no religion. Most of them said that they were rejected by the religion of their parents and so now they cannot claim a religion because most popular belief systems condemn homosexuality. The biggest problem that lesbian youth face is their families not accepting them as homosexual. Most of the violence that lesbians encounter is domestic and mostly comes from the family. As one expert states, the violence against homosexuals in Brazil is fuelled by "conservative sectors of different religions, the 'Talibans of the Bible', who foment prejudice and homophobia."¹⁸

The same young lesbian from my example above in reference to public displays of affection comes from a Mormon family. When I asked her if she, herself is Mormon she said that her family is Mormon but that she is not because the church is against homosexuality. She says that the Christian religions condemn homosexuality and do not view lesbians as people. Only her sister knows that she

¹⁸ Osava, "Courts."

is gay. She does not want to tell the rest of her family because she fears that they will reject her on religious grounds.

Another young lesbian was experiencing a lot of conflict with her mother because of her mother's ultra Catholic beliefs, which contrast with her daughter's homosexuality. They had been fighting for the better part of a year sometimes including physical abuse. Her mother blamed every trouble in her daughter's life, including illness, on her daughter's homosexuality. Her mom used to adore her girlfriend before she found out that she wasn't just a friend. After she found out she forbid her girlfriend to be in the house. She respects her mother's extreme Catholic views but she knows that she doesn't have to internalize them. She told her mom that she will never stop being her daughter and that society and religion had caused the gap between them. The daughter claims that people use religion to judge other people's private lives and that this is invasive.

Many women I interviewed said that their family knows about their being gay but doesn't accept, or that their family knows but don't want to know. One lesbian said that even though her family knows and accepts her and her girlfriend, they still do not act as a couple in front of them at holiday dinners. Thus, this aspect of their lives is ignored. Even though the daughter has gone through the process of coming out to their family they still have to conduct their personal lives in secret.

How society treats the different categories

Women from the two different categories of lesbians previously described generally exhibit different levels of observable homosexual behavior and therefore face different problems in relation to discrimination and visibility. Group two women in Salvador blend in with heterosexual women in terms of outward appearance and thus are not obviously homosexual, whereas, group one lesbians are distinguishable by their outward appearance and demeanor. Group two lesbian women, which seem to compose the majority of lesbians in Salvador, adhere to the social code that mandates that women dress and act with a certain level of femininity. Most of the women I interviewed are group two lesbians and report that they have never having encountered discrimination. These women are passing for straight by maintaining a traditionally feminine appearance, thus are not targets for discriminatory acts. As a general rule, when a person's homosexuality is more perceptible they encounter a higher amount of discrimination than those who are not obviously gay. For example, a category one lesbian that I interviewed said that, as a youth, she used to receive discrimination from class mates calling her "*sapatão*" because she had a very masculine nature that identified her as gay to the public, despite the fact that she was not out as a lesbian. Nevertheless, she said that these forms of discrimination don't happen to her anymore because now she has gained respect from the people around her through her education and occupation which overrides her apparent homosexuality.

However, two of the group one lesbians that I interviewed, including the woman from my previous example, said that they do not show affection in public out of respect for society and not because of fear. They said that they don't want to shock people and that this conservative society is not ready to have a rainbow flag held in front of their face. These women held college degrees and worked in professional jobs. When I asked them if they had ever lied about their orientation to avoid discrimination they both replied that they had lied in the context of their jobs. One of them said that she works in theatre and so her coworkers are slightly more open minded. Yet, she said that because they are aware of her sexuality they still watch closely when her girlfriend visits her at work even though they do not show affection in front of her coworkers. This shows how a group one lesbian is always displaying her homosexual identity regardless of whether or not she is explicitly doing anything that indicates same sex preferences.

In gay places such as clubs and bars, working under the assumption that the majority of women present are gay, I observed that there were far more group two lesbians than group one lesbians. However, as noted by a few of my subjects, the number of feminine lesbians in relation to masculine lesbians is skewed because of the negative implications of higher visibility. One woman told me that she has butch friends that only show their outward masculinity in their homes. They dress femininely when they are in the streets in order to avoid people's stares and harassment. Therefore my research shows that there are a larger amount of category two lesbians because they encounter less discrimination from society.

The heterosexual male ideals that govern the lives of citizens in Salvador influence the lives of lesbian women living in this culture. Perhaps one of the reasons that feminine women encounter less discrimination in the streets, even when they are identified as homosexual through obvious displays of lesbianism, has to do with heterosexual attraction to lesbian women. As mentioned above in reference to public displays of affection, the heterosexual male sexually voyeurizes their own fantasy ideal of the lesbian couple. One of my group's two subjects noted that one of the reasons that feminine lesbians are less discriminated against is because men are more attracted to feminine women than masculine women and so feminine lesbians are more accepted by heterosexual society. This perfectly illustrates the condition that many lesbians in Salvador wake up to each day. The choices that she has to make are balanced between what society tells her she should be and how she wants to be. This is not to say that all lesbians, given a more morally open society would behave more masculine, but the possibility exists that there would be more variance instead of the current imbalance between category one and two lesbians. Now, I will discuss current attitudes within the lesbian community regarding the different lesbian categories.

How lesbians treat the different categories

A few women that I interviewed told me that for a butch lesbian to prefer a femme lesbian and vice versa are more common than to have two femme women together or two butch women together. However, most of the feminine women I interviewed stated that they preferred feminine women over butch women, which negates what they said about the butch and femmes preferring the other. This confirms the statement made by a more masculine subject that feminine lesbians do not mix socially with butch lesbians. When a couple goes to a bar, if one of them is a conspicuous category one lesbian, they sit separately. Two of my category two lesbian subjects stated that they preferred women who were a little bit masculine but not too much. So, in this case they were describing either a group two lesbian or a "*goby*" and not a group one lesbian. One woman said that although a category one lesbian will sometimes have a relationship with a category two lesbian do not like to be seen together. Many group two women expressed that they had a difficult time understanding very masculine women and also the attraction to masculine women, demonstrating that social structures within the lesbian community are still set strongly in separate categories. One lesbian said that if she wanted to date someone masculine she could just date a man. Another woman that I had an informal conversation expressed that she believes that society is constantly asserting that only men are supposed to love women. So, if a woman loves another woman, she subconsciously thinks that she has to assume the role of a man thus dressing and acting masculine. Some lesbians even

expressed embarrassment at being in the same social group as masculine lesbians. This shows how category two lesbians live separately from the stigmatized category one lesbians.

Recognition within the lesbian community

The category two lesbian communities have very few signifiers that indicate female homosexuality and they are quick to point out that nothing is certain and identifying someone as a lesbian is difficult unless they are masculine. The most reliant of these is what I call "the look of lesbian acknowledgement." Every single lesbian that I interviewed replied that the way to know if a woman is gay is by her eyes. In this culture it is very common for people passing you on the street to look into your eyes. The look of lesbian acknowledgement lasts a bit longer than is normal. The look, if returned, acts as recognition between two people of a secret minority. Often lesbians in Salvador rely entirely on this particular look in the eyes. However, this exchange does not signify sexual attraction between the two women, the look simply says, "Are you gay? Because, I am." The fact that something as inconspicuous as a glance in the eyes is the strongest signifier between lesbians shows that group two lesbians rely on indicators that don't automatically announce themselves to the rest of the public.

I had an informal conversation with a heterosexual woman associated with GPM who asserted that a person can never know if someone is gay just by looking at them. In addition, she said that women always look at each other, whether they

are gay are straight, as a way to size each other up. I thought this was very interesting because she showed that she was not aware of the look of lesbian acknowledgement as a non-lesbian. In addition, she said that even a woman who is walking down the street wearing men's' clothing may just be wearing her husbands clothes. Some of the other women in the room, who were category two lesbians, nodded their heads in agreement to some of what she had said. This view is consistent with the responses that I received from other group two lesbians regarding the style of dress and outward appearance of lesbians. Many of them were reluctant to describe how lesbians dress differently than heterosexual women.

Although far from absolute, I discovered, through observation and questioning, some small indicators of both group two and group one lesbians. Firstly, I noticed that lesbian women dress simply, without many of the frills common to Brazilian style such as extra ties, bright colors, and flashy accessories. In addition, I found that certain types of jewelry and tattoos are other indicators of lesbianism. Many of the gay women I interviewed and observed had multiple ear-piercing with stainless steel jewelry. Thick wrist cuffs and large noticeable tattoos are also general indicators. Some lesbians said that lesbian women have more presence and are more firm than straight women. To emphasize this difference one of my subjects demonstrated how straight women gesticulate by picking up her glass from the table delicately with two fingers with an expression of

passiveness on her face. Then she showed how she actually acts by grabbing the glass swiftly with her whole hand while displaying a nonchalant expression.

Additionally, one characteristic I find important to note is that group one lesbians tend to be older. Parallel to what my advisor pointed out that older women are more comfortable and secure in their identity, I found that there was a far higher occurrence of masculinity in older lesbians from my observations and interviews. All of the three lesbians I interviewed older than 25 years old displayed stronger characteristics of masculinity than the rest of my subjects. For example, the night I interviewed these women, two of them had short haircuts and wore cargo pants and sporty style shirts.

Lesbians and bisexuality

One bright young lesbian I interviewed expressed that people can only identify patterns and hope that they hold true because no one can predict the future. Many lesbians I encountered thought that bisexuals are simply undecided about their sexuality and so identify as bisexual to avoid claiming a certain sexual orientation. One bisexual that I interviewed said that life would be easier if she could choose to be either heterosexual or homosexual. I found that among category two lesbians, bisexuals carry a stigma that prohibits them from being accepted into the lesbian community. However, sexual ambiguity and heterogeneity was more common within the context of the GPM. For example, one woman in the group identified by stating, "Estou hetero." Literally this means "I

am straight". However, the verb that she chose to use is one of two verbs in Portuguese that mean "to be." The verb that she chose to describe her state of being signifies a temporary condition such as, "I am at the beach". Therefore, she indicated that she was heterosexual for the time being but that she is open to various possibilities. I observed that most of the time the discussions on bisexuality were directed towards a heterosexual woman being open to a homosexual experience in contrast to one of the lesbians in the group being open to a heterosexual experience. In other contexts the lesbian categories and sexual orientations were more consistently separated. Only two of my fourteen interviewees expressed that they thought that bisexuality is normal and most of the lesbians I interviewed reported that a majority of their friends were other homosexual women. This exemplifies how category two lesbians tend to reject both sexual ambiguity and heterosexuality. My personal theory as to the cause of this rejection is that bisexuality poses a threat to lesbian women because these women, on the whole, do not choose to be a member of an oppressed minority group, whether they are obvious to the rest of society or not as homosexuals. Lesbian women form tight knit communities that ensure their survival in a society that largely rejects and demonizes them. Therefore, lesbians view a person that has the option to be a part of this marginal group as a betrayal to the lesbian community.

Lesbians and gay men

I have already discussed the varying levels of visibility between the two categories of lesbians. Lastly, I will examine the level of visibility between gay men and lesbians in Salvador in order to show how lesbian women interact differently within society because of their gender. Through my research I found that the same norms that exist in this machismo culture also influence the different genders regardless of sexual orientation. Because of the necessity for homosexuality to be hidden in Brazil, there is very little information that measures population statistics in relation to homosexuals. One heterosexual woman I talked with said that in Brazil you don't really see lesbians because they are mostly all in the closet. She also said that Brazil has a lot more out gay men than out women. Many of my key informants and the majority of lesbians I interviewed confirmed this statement. Although, many said that there are an equal amount of lesbians and gays in Salvador but that men are more declared than lesbians because the majority of gay men fit the stereotype of the homosexual male. Gay men frequent gay places, such as bars and clubs, more often than lesbians and on addition they are more often out to their families and friends. I attribute this imbalance to the gender inequalities already present in society.

In terms of discrimination, one man that works at GGB said that he thinks there is equal discrimination against gay men as there is against butch women, even though numerically there is less, because they are both obviously homosexual to society. Both groups, gay men and category one lesbians, are

pushed out of society for crossing clear thresholds of unacceptable behavior which is homosexuality. This is not to say that group two lesbians do not face varying forms of discrimination because of their homosexuality. In many instances, the constant struggle to deny and hide an important aspect of your life is equally difficult.

In accordance to the information I found regarding the lesbian history of participation in social organizations I discovered that very few women were active with the Grupo Gay da Bahia. When I attended a meeting at the GGB for gay youth I observed that there were about 30 men at the meeting and only 3 women. When I asked about this imbalance one of the woman in attendance confirmed that the meetings were usually comprised in this way. One explanation for this imbalance that I received from a man that worked with GGB is that gay men are more out and visible and therefore they receive more discrimination. This makes their lives harder and because of this they are more organized and participate more in organizations such as GGB by going to meetings. I received a different explanation from my lesbian advisor who said that women don't attend the meetings at GGB because when a woman talks about sex, she is actually talking about much larger issues that make talking in a group more complicated and personal. Men find the discussion of issues surrounding sexuality easier to discuss in large groups because they only talk about the surface issue of sexual orientation. She also said that when a woman goes to these meetings she goes to

laugh, not to discuss. Most of the women that attend meetings at the GGB are adolescents.

Grupo Palavra de Mulher started working with lesbians in 2000 because there was a demand for a lesbian right organization after the death of the Grupo Lésbica da Bahia (GLB). The GLB was originally a part of the GGB but when the president of the group moved away they were unable to maintain the leadership they needed to continue. My advisor, the president of GPM, expressed that the Grupo Lésbica did not have the ambition to grow politically. Additionally, she said that a group just for lesbians could not exist in Salvador as a non-governmental organization (NGO) because they would never be able to raise enough funds. Therefore, the GPM is focused on gaining equal rights for all women. Many times feminist organizations and feminist study exclude lesbians from their issue base, but the GPM includes lesbians as an oppressed minority group that deserves to right for equality within the already gender biased society.

Conclusion

To reiterate, Mary McIntosh claimed that homosexuals serve as a stigmatized community that are marginalized and separated from the whole in order to keep society morally pure.¹⁹ Through my research I discovered that the “stigmatized individuals,” that McIntosh alludes to, are actually a small minority of Lesbians in Salvador that act as the whipping boys for the rest of the larger lesbian community. I showed that group one lesbians, are recognizable through their outward appearance as deviants to the clear social and moral code that governs the lives of people in Salvador. The other, unrecognizable second category lives below the line of recognition to mainstream society and thus are not labeled deviants. Both methods of dealing with social deviance are equally debilitating. Group one lesbians are obvious on the outside and therefore have to be more guarded in their actions having to do with the public and work. They are stigmatized by both heterosexuals and other lesbians. They are pushed away as the deviants. Lesbians who can interact with society do not want to associate with those deviants for fear of being labeled the like. On the other hand, group two lesbians fit into society by denial of self. Although this is not to say that they do not face discrimination just because they are not immediately recognizable. Very few lesbian women live freely within this society, including lesbians. I found that most lesbians, regardless of category, have family problems regarding their

¹⁹ Epstien, “A Queer Encounter”, 191.

sexuality largely because of the strong presence of religion in this culture, whether they are out to them or not.

I think that as a subversive minority that is viewed as a threat to the social fabric of the culture by the hegemonic power lesbian women have the potential to act as tools to undermine and change current moral institutions that are left over from colonialist authoritarian oppression. I believe that through their own visibility lesbians have the power to change homophobic stereotypes and open minds. Especially since homosexuality doesn't discriminate on the basis of other social factors. Lesbian women are present in all cultures, in all communities and in all countries. Brazil is not the only machismo country. Christian religions comprise the majority of the world's religions. Most Christian religions condemn homosexuality in accordance to the teachings in the bible. Therefore, much of the world is prejudiced against homosexuals and so they are cast aside as perverts and demons in order to maintain a homogeneously moral society. Lesbian women everywhere encounter discrimination and live their lives in fear. My hope is that lesbian women will have the courage to be seen and recognized so that people will open their minds to the existence of a sexually heterogeneous society. Throughout my research I met a few homosexual women, including my advisor, who worked everyday to raise awareness of lesbian women in Salvador. These women showed me that as long as you speak out for your rights, your outward appearance does not matter. Whether or not a person is obviously homosexual or not, they can still they can still demand and fight for equality.

I think my paper would have been better if I had asked about school interactions. When I started out interviewing I did not already have a list of people to interview. I relied on meeting new subjects through friends, advisors and gay places. I didn't anticipate that I would meet many younger lesbians at *Center Lapa*. Although these women were very informative, my questions hadn't accounted for different age groups because I originally wanted to have age, class, race and socioeconomic levels as independent factors for my research. I think it would be interesting to study how lesbians interact within the context of other marginalized sectors of society in terms of race and class, instead of using these demographics as independent factors. One person who works at GGB compared the situation of race to that of homosexuality concerning the census. The census does not account for different shades and degrees of black. He alleged that the exclusion of the question of homosexuality from the census is like another form of racism because both groups are rejected and marginalized sectors of Brazilian society. This brings me to discuss the subjects in relation to lesbians in Salvador that would be interesting to study further.

The African derived religion of *Candomble*, which is practiced by a minority of people in Salvador, would be interesting to study in relation to female homosexuality. The Candomble religion accepts homosexuality as normal. Therefore, I am interested to study this religion in relation to the level of visibility of lesbians who practice and the number of practitioners that are homosexual or bisexual. In addition, I would like to study how lesbian women interact with society

when they belong to several minority groups in terms of race, class, sexual orientation and religion. Does belonging to a minority religion that accepts homosexuality make life easier or harder for lesbians? Does the religion provide a sense of community or just make it even harder to move about in mainstream society?

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Expert Interviews

Oseas
President, Grupo Gay Negro da Bahia
May 2, 2005
GGB, Pelourinho

Christiano
Coordinator, Grupo Gay Jovem da Bahia
May 3, 2005
GGB, Pelourinho

Valquíria Costa
President, Grupo Palavra de Mulher
May 5, 2005
Primar, Salon de Beleza

Lesbian Interviews

Carol
Age 24
May 3, 2005
Center Lapa

Larissa
Age 16
May 3, 2005
Center Lapa

Carolina
Age 23
May 3, 2005
Center Lapa

Debora
Age 19
May 3, 2005
Center Lapa

Carmen
Age 18
May 9, 2005
Center Lapa

Fernanda
Age 22
May 10, 2005
GPM

Sandra
Age 21
May 11, 2005
Center Lapa

Sheely
Age 24
May 11, 2005
Center Lapa

Bianca
Age 25
May 12, 2005
Frankfurt Bar

Karla
Age 38
May 12, 2005
Frankfurt Bar

Adriana
Age 33
May 12, 2005
Frankfurt Bar

Roseli
Age 18
May 13, 2005
Bookstore

Silvana
Age 21
May 13, 2005
GPM

Informal Interviews

Carol
April 19, 2005
Bar Camarin, Beca das Artistas

Luiza
April 21, 2005
House of Tania, Garcia

Camila
May 10, 2005
GPM

Appendix

I could not have done this research project in the United States since it was specifically about how lesbians live within a Latino-American machismo culture. Salvador provided an ideal setting for my study because it is a large city with a strong African influence and has a history of oppression and violence. I don't think I could have done any part of this research in the US other than very base secondary research because I found no secondary sources on lesbians, specifically, in Salvador or in Brazil.

I don't think doing the ISP changed my learning style but I do think it helped to change my research style because of the time limits and size requirement. I knew that I had to keep a clear research question in mind when doing my research because having endless possibilities can allow for an overload of unfocused data. My final paper is approximately 15 percent secondary sources, which are mostly contained in the introduction section of the write up. I excluded some data I had gathered because I could not find a way for it to support or negate my thesis and had nothing to do with my problem statement.

I think the most important aspect of the field exercises and the drop-offs was getting used to simply walking up to someone and asking for information. It took me a little time to realize that time is valued differently in Brazil and thus many Brazilians are not inconvenienced when someone asks them for information.

The FSS readings most significantly influenced my writing process because I had never written a large scale research paper from primary data before. Although some of the readings seemed irrelevant and repetitive, I most of them were very helpful in helping me in almost every step of the ISP process from organization of ideas to writing the final paper. My principle problem while doing the ISP was attacking the daunting task of writing the paper. I feel I could have done research for years and years without ever feeling the need to organize my work journal into thematic paragraphs. So, I began writing topic sentences into my outline and from there I found the words flowed a little easier.

My topic changed completely after a lecture by Keila Simpson, coordinator of the Association of transvestites in Bahia. I was enraptured by the lecture and realized that I was never going to be as interested in public transportation as I was in the queer subculture of Salvador. I talked to Keila after the lecture and then began right away to write a new ISP proposal and make contacts with potential advisors. I started off at Grupo Gay da Bahia and talked to the men who worked there. They, in turn, sent me to Palavra de Mulher. There I met my advisor and she has been my greatest resource as far as getting me other resources and giving me opportunities to make more contacts. I also met a young lesbian before the ISP period began that was of great use to me because she was very outgoing and got many women she knew to do interviews with me. As far as secondary sources, I found many books on homosexuality in Brazil in the office of Palavra de Mulher and some more general sources in online journals. As aforementioned, my advisor, Valquíria Costa was very helpful to me. She introduced me to anyone she came in

contact with while I was around and gave me the opportunity to attend several events that were very helpful to my research. She was also available to talk about my project and my paper on a fairly regular basis. She provided a well rounded perspective on my project as a key informant because of the balanced nature of the work that Palavra de Mulher does. She is used to working with a range of lesbians of different races and socio-economic levels.

I did reach some dead ends as far as awareness of discrimination and prejudice. I think that my interviewees had different concepts of what these two things are than what I had in mind. I also encountered several problems because of the language barrier. However, spending time talking and socializing with my contacts every day definitely improved my Portuguese conversational skills. I think the principle lesson I learned from this process is to make friends, not sources. I think that the people that helped me the most were the people I had built up good relationships with. These people seemed more willing to talk in length about my project and also pointed me in the direction of new contacts. Therefore, this would be my advice to any student wishing to study the queer community in Salvador. If the conditions were right I would be willing to undertake a similar project again, perhaps in another region of Brazil or another country in Latin America in order to contrast and compare the effects of machismo and the gender hierarchy in other catholic dominated countries.

Formal Interview Questions: Lesbian

Date/Time:

Location:

Name:

Age:

Occupation:

Religion:

1. **Como este sociedade trata as lésbicas?**
2. Are there more lesbians or gays in Salvador? Why?
3. **Em sua opinião, existe mais lésbicas ou gays em salvador? Porque?**
4. Do gay men or lesbians get discriminated against more?
5. **As Lésbicas ou Gays recebe mais discriminação?**
6. How can you tell if someone is a lesbian?
7. **Como você sabe quando uma mulher e gay?**
8. Do you think you dress differently from straight women?
9. **Lésbicas vestem deferente das outras mulheres?**
10. Do you ever feel discriminated against for being lesbian?
11. **Você já sentiu com discriminação porque você e uma lésbica?**
12. Have you ever felt in danger because you were a lesbian?
13. **Voce ja senti em perigoso porque voce e lesbica?**
14. Have you ever lied about your sexuality to avoid discrimination?
15. **Você já mentiu sobre sua orientação para evitar discriminação?**
16. How open are you about your sexuality? Who knows?
17. **Como aberta e você sobre sua sexualidade? Quem sabe?**
18. What kind of responses have you received?
19. **Come eram algumas respostas você já recebeu?**
20. Does your family know?
21. **Sua família sabe que você e gay?**
22. How was that?

23. **Como era?**
24. How is your relationship with them now?
25. **Como e sua relação com eles agora?**
26. Do you identify as butch/femme/neither/other?
27. **Você identifica com masculina ou feminina ou uma outra?**
28. What do you think of butch/femme lesbians?
29. **O que você acha sobre lésbicas masculinas/femininas?**
30. Do you prefer butch or femme girls? Why?
31. **Você prefere mulheres masculinas ou femininas?**
32. Which are there more of butch or femme?
33. **Existe mais lésbicas femininas ou masculinas em Salvador? Porque?**
34. **Como veste as lésbicas masculinas?**
35. Do you think that butch women want to be men?
36. **Você acha que lésbicas masculinas querem seja homens?**
37. What do you call women that you date?
38. **O que voce chama sua enamorada?**
39. What are some names for lesbians? Sao negativos ou positivos?
40. **Quais são gírias para as lésbicas?**
41. When did you first know that you were a lesbian?
42. **Quando você soube que você e gosta das mulheres?**
43. How old were you when you had your first lesbian experience?
44. **Quando estava sua primeira experiência com uma mulher?**
45. Como era?
46. **Quantos anos tinham ela?**
47. **(e essa diferenca de idades comum?)**
48. **Como você conheceu ela?**
49. **Ja tem uma experiencia ou relacao com um homem?**
50. How do lesbians meet each other?

51. **Como as lesbicas conhecer outros lesbicas para o primero vez?**
52. How is this different or the same as how heterosexuals date?
53. **Acha que as lesbicas funcionam diferente das heteros em termos do amor?**
54. Are your friends gay?
55. **Seus amigos sao gays?**
56. Do you ever show public affection for another woman? Why? What types? Where?
57. **Você mostrar carinhos em publico com suas enamoradas? Onde? O Que tipos?**
58. Do you like to go out? Where?
59. **Você gosta de sair? Onde?**
60. Do you think there are enough places for gays in Salvador?
61. **Existe suficiente lugares para os gays em salvador?**
62. Would you ever want to leave Salvador? Why?
63. **Você gostaria morar em um outro lugar? Outros pais? Porque?**
64. **O que você acha sobre bixualidade?**
65. **Existe lésbicas famosas? Quem?**
66. Can you help me meet other lesbians that you know for interviews?
67. **Você conhece outras lésbicas que eu posso entrevistar? Falar com?**